

Session #7

**Redesigning [Main Streets](#) in Small Communities  
The Viagra of Transportation Investment**

by

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**Abstract**

The national Main Street movement is building momentum. Over 1,200 small communities across America have rediscovered their Main Streets with impressive investment in time, energy and money. The tangible measures of return include: economic growth in jobs and tax revenues; effective “recycling” of infrastructure, buildings and land; a pleasing landscape environment; and more efficient transportation networks. This paper provides a brief background of the Main Street movement and describes design elements and other factors needed to make Main Street retrofit projects a success.

## **Redesigning Main Streets in Small Communities The Viagra of Transportation Investment**

### **Traditions and Challenges**

Main Streets define civic pride and create an important “place” in American towns. The birth of the classic American Main Street is rooted to the early part of this century--when our civic identity was reflected by closely knit shops, homes, offices, churches, and public spaces. Main Streets illustrated America’s greatest tradition of success.

By the latter half the 20th Century, Main Street districts were in decline. Increasing competition from super regional shopping centers, power centers and sprawling suburban development, fed largely by state and federal highway projects that focused on increasing capacity for a burgeoning suburban population which resulted in an emphasis on mobility rather than preservation. These policies and social changes led towards a decline in Main Street investment, and in many cases a loss of traditional civic character.

The recent shift in federal and state transportation and land use policies, as embellished by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, and the Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21), emphasize moving people and goods (rather than vehicles) and enhancing transportation-efficient communities.

A National Main Street movement is also underway, with a host of successful case studies, lessons learned, and impressive results. In fact, the National Main Street Center estimates that over \$5.8 billion has been reinvested in tangible improvements in 1,200 communities in 42 states since the 1980s. This represents a return of nearly \$40 in private investment for each \$1 of local public dollars spent [Johnson, Jan. 1998. Great American Main Street Awards Salute Downtown Revitalization in Five Communities, Preservation Magazine]. It is fair to say that these results please all player participants involved in Main Street planning, design and development.

### **Main Streets Defined**

Main Street is an important place in the landscape of American towns. From a traveler’s perspective, a town’s “main street” is often an abrupt change in their continuous route along a state highway. It is also a traveler’s dominant experience of a community’s economic and architectural images. For some travelers, it may be a momentary stop with a pedestrian experience in a setting of more complexity than they would have noticed as a motorist. From a resident’s perspective, a main street provides access to the town’s public places and a setting for shared activities such as shopping, conducting business, and going to school. While main street is may not be a resident’s dominant experience of their community, it does contribute to their sense of place and civic pride.

The classic American main street can be categorized in two basic types. The first type, found in thousands of communities with 2,000 to 25,000 population, is a linear main street which is really a

state highway passing through the town on its way to the next town. The highway becomes a commercial street, reaching an architectural climax that is usually only a few blocks long. Those few blocks create the sense of place thought of as “downtown” in most communities. What lies beyond downtown, visually and functionally, are vast corridors where mobility dominates with higher operating speeds.

The second type of main street is less common. This main street may also be part of a highway corridor and is equally linear. However, it leads to something more interesting than the rest of the highway. This main street is usually no more than a few blocks long, ending at a strong visual focus, such as a public square, a school, a civic building, or the junction of two roads. There is often a stronger sense of enclosure and architectural space compared to the first type of main street.

For both types of main street, aesthetic factors and the overall environment are critical factors in attracting and retaining businesses, shoppers, pedestrians, and motorists. Successful redevelopment efforts require careful planning to overcome the tendency of main streets in small communities to become little more than corridors and access points for vehicles in a hodge-podge of architecture and roadway signs.

### **What makes Main Streets successful?**

The impact of transportation and changing consumer preferences have forced many Main Streets to change or suffer a slow death. Vacant department stores may get converted into smaller retail stores, offices or libraries. Specialty themes often emerge: antiques, eating and drinking, and retail boutiques--to lure consumers away from the “plain vanilla” shopping malls and power centers. Civic minded business leaders craft effective downtown promotions, events and coordinated marketing campaigns to offer choices to local residents.

As transportation and land use specialists we can influence the continuing success of Main Streets. To do so, we first must understand the fundamental components of successful main streets. Key ingredients of successful Main Streets in small to medium sized communities include:

- Dollars and Sense of Location
- Pedestrian is King (or Queen)
- Accommodate the Sunday Drive
- Streetscapes that Speak for Themselves
- Incremental Change--Attention to “Little Things”
- Proactive Champions that Leverage Returns

***Dollars and Sense of Location*** - population density and demographics undergird the long-term success of Main Streets. A recent study titled, *The Long Branch Main Street Project report, “41 Ways to Revitalize Main Street”* (Toronto Metro Planning Department), examined positive and negative main street examples throughout the Toronto region. The study concluded that population density within a convenient walking distance (0.6 miles) made the most critical difference to continuing success of main streets. Because the majority of Main Street businesses

rely primarily upon local patronage, they tend to reflect disposable income levels and the overall economic health of small communities.

***Pedestrian is King (or Queen)*** - accommodating pedestrians is as important (if not more so) than accommodating automobiles. Main Streets must look and feel like a good place to take a stroll, relax and safely move around by foot. Proper sidewalk connections along Main Streets and to adjacent population centers are both important. Consumer surveys in Lake Grove, Oregon determined that primary access to their main street is by car because walking and street crossings are perceived as too far or too dangerous.

***Accommodate the Sunday Drive*** - go ahead and accommodate the “Sunday drive” because vehicular traffic is vital for retail businesses to survive, especially in small communities with dispersed development patterns. Since our dependence on cars will not wither away it is important to calm the street to slow down vehicular traffic. Once speeds are less than 30 mph, drivers begin to observe their surroundings more and become convenient candidates for a Main Street experience.

Traffic calming techniques have been well documented (see Washington State Department of Transportation, Pedestrian Facilities and Traffic Calming Guidebooks) in theory and practice. While most current examples are from larger cities and metropolitan areas, smaller Oregon communities such as Lake Oswego, Joseph, Klamath Falls and Hood River have used several traffic calming techniques to create a shared public use roadway and a unique driving experience. Most common techniques include:

- Redefining curbs (for tighter turns, bulb outs and ADA compliance);
- A consistent street grid with 200 to 240 foot +/- block spacing;
- Narrow street width;
- On-street parallel parking;
- Managing driveway and road approach access;
- Paving materials at crosswalks and street corners;
- Widening the sidewalk
- Raising crosswalks and providing center median refuge areas; and
- Including street trees and other landscaping;

Two-way traffic flow is usually preferred to one-way couplets when peak hour traffic is generally less than 2,000 trips per hour. However, these traffic calming techniques can work well in both situations.

Be careful to pay attention to truck movements and turning requirements. This includes designing for business services, by including appropriate on-street loading zones or service alleys. Designated truck routes may also be an effective means of limiting truck turning movements along Main Streets and reducing potential truck/vehicle/pedestrian safety conflicts.

These traffic circulation and calming techniques are important roadway design elements to be considered by transportation planners, landscape architects, and civil engineers. When used in

combination with building design and special streetscape features they create an effective Main Street environment.

***Streetscapes that Speak for Themselves*** - People are attracted to interesting and continuous landscape patterns, attractive building frontages, shade trees, plantings, public art, and pathways. Once “off their seat and on their feet”, drivers become pedestrians and patrons. As pass-by drivers witness pedestrian activity they too “get off their seat and on their feet” with reason to stop, explore, patronize or tour.

Important elements of streetscape design often include the previously mentioned traffic calming and pedestrian features plus:

- Landscape buffers for off-street parking areas
- Park benches, fountains, trash containers;
- Pedestrian activated street crossings;
- Maps of businesses or areas of interest
- Decorative details, such as hanging baskets or banners;
- Building facade enhancements, including unified signage or awnings; and
- Public art displays.

***Incremental Change--Attention to “Little Things”*** - When redesigning a Main Street think small at first. Start with one or two blocks in the core of downtown. Focus on details and build upon unique features in the community. Start incrementally with affordable, tasteful and effective improvements that have broad based public and private acceptance. Involve local property owners, chamber officials, neighborhoods, and elected officials in the planning and design process. Small victories instill community confidence in Main Street revitalization and belief that complex problems can be solved.

Always anticipate construction staging problems regarding reduced traffic access, parking limits, and peak seasonal sales periods. Never stage construction around holiday shopping seasons such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. Make sure you involve local businesses in construction mitigation planning to offset undue burden caused during construction. There of course will be some sacrifices made, but in the end almost everyone will benefit from the improvement.

***Proactive Champions that Leverage Returns***--successful Main Streets have many champions. Individuals and associations must be committed to “the vision” before, during and after construction. To redesign your Main Street you must first identify who are the local champions, and confirm their role in:

- Raising public awareness of project need and importance;
- Generating support by property owners/tenants and elected officials;
- Solidifying funding partnerships for capital and maintenance costs;
- Establishing a formal design review process;
- Maintaining and promoting Main Streets once improvements are made; and
- Downtown economic development and clearing house for funding/financing.

## **Back to the Future**

The National Main Street movement will surely gain momentum in the 21st Century as communities commemorate their unique civic culture. Future funding also looks promising. Under the congressional transportation bill TEA-21, funding is established in several programs that benefit Main Street retrofit design projects: surface transportation program, special enhancement program, congestion mitigation air quality program, and the new Transportation and Community and System Preservation pilot program.

Communities throughout the northwest are finding that Main Street improvements are cost effective means to revigorate businesses and stimulate economic activity. When along state routes, Main Street design and traffic calming projects can leverage private investment and can lead to increased state access control--which helps preserve the capacity and function of state highways.

As you partner with local and state interests on your next Main Street project, take solace in the fact that you are about to have a measurable positive affect on a community by enhancing its image and economic vitality.